

Over the counter (OTC) medicines Frequently Asked Questions

What is self-care?

Self-care is about people taking responsibility to protect, maintain and improve their health, wellbeing or wellness. It includes making lifestyle changes around smoking, alcohol, diet and exercise, but it also includes how someone manages any illnesses they have, whether they have a long term condition or just a minor ailment.

Good self-care is very important because it improves someone's health, independence and quality of life. It also reduces the burden on NHS services and finances.

What is a minor ailment?

This is a minor illness or condition. Some examples of minor ailments are:

- Acne (mild)
- Athlete's foot
- Colds and flu
- Conjunctivitis
- Constipation
- Cough
- Hay fever
- Headache
- Nasal congestion

Minor ailments can easily be treated with medicines that can be bought over the counter (OTC) at a pharmacy or at other retail outlets like supermarkets. Many minor illnesses are "self-limiting" which means they get better by themselves, sometimes with no treatment needed. Some of these OTC medicines do not have much evidence that they really work, such as cough and cold medicines, so they are not a good use of NHS resources. Although some of these OTC medicines are available on prescription it does not mean that your GP practice will prescribe for you for a minor ailment.

What is an over the counter (OTC) medicine?

An OTC medicine is a medicine that can be bought from a pharmacy or may also be available at other outlets such as supermarkets, petrol stations or convenience stores. You do not need a prescription for OTC medicines. Some examples of common OTC medicines are:

- Painkillers, such as paracetamol and Ibuprofen
- Indigestion remedies
- Cough mixtures
- Antihistamine tablets
- Moisturising creams
- Sore throat lozenges
- Multivitamins

What is the cost to the NHS in Herefordshire of prescribing OTC medicines?

In the last 12 months in 2017, it cost the NHS in Herefordshire around £1.5 million to prescribe these medicines which are readily available to buy.

Is it more expensive for the NHS to prescribe these medicines than it is for someone to buy them?

Yes. Although the NHS works hard to source the most cost-effective medicines, when they are prescribed we have to pay for all the administrative costs involved. For example, we have to pay doctors and pharmacists for their work and cover the cost of prescription pads,

medicines bottles and other consumables. We also have to pay the NHS staff who calculate how much money doctors and pharmacists should receive.

When someone buys a medicine OTC instead, the NHS doesn't have to pay these costs, or the cost of the medicine itself. This means that we can then spend that money on treatments and services for other patients.

Why are you reviewing the prescribing of OTC medicines?

Prescribing medicines that are available to buy OTC costs the NHS a lot of money. Additionally, a fifth of GP appointments are taken up by minor ailments, costing the NHS nationally an estimated £2 billion a year. Reducing these appointments would free up GP time for patients with more serious health problems. The money spent on prescribing these medicines could be reinvested in other treatments and services for patients.

As pharmacies are able to treat these conditions without an appointment, it saves patients time too as they don't need an appointment to see a pharmacist and pharmacies are often open much longer hours than GP surgeries.

Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) have a duty to ensure that NHS money is spent well, so we need to continually look for opportunities to reduce any unnecessary prescribing or waste in the health system.

Other CCGs have already made this change and so this change brings Herefordshire into line with neighbouring CCGs ie Worcestershire, Gloucestershire and Shropshire.

General Exceptions to the Guidance as per NHS England guidance:

In certain scenarios patients should continue to have their treatments prescribed and these are outlined below:

- Patients prescribed an OTC treatment for a long term condition (e.g. regular pain relief for chronic arthritis or treatments for inflammatory bowel disease).
- For the treatment of more complex forms of minor illnesses (e.g. severe migraines that are unresponsive to over the counter medicines).
- For those patients that have symptoms that suggest the condition is not minor (i.e. those with red flag symptoms for example indigestion with very bad pain.)
- Treatment for complex patients (e.g. immunosuppressed patients).
- Patients on prescription only treatments.
- Patients prescribed OTC products to treat an adverse effect or symptom of a more complex illness and/or prescription only medications should continue to have these products prescribed on the NHS.
- Circumstances where the product licence doesn't allow the product to be sold over the counter to certain groups of patients. This may vary by medicine, but could include babies, children and/or women who are pregnant or breast-feeding. Community Pharmacists will be aware of what these are and can advise accordingly.
- Patients with a minor condition suitable for self-care that has not responded sufficiently to treatment with an OTC product.
- Patients where the clinician considers that the presenting symptom is due to a condition that would not be considered a minor condition.
- Circumstances where the prescriber believes that in their clinical judgement, exceptional circumstances exist that warrant deviation from the recommendation to self-care.
- Individual patients where the clinician considers that their ability to self-manage is compromised as a consequence of medical, mental health or significant social vulnerability to the extent that their health and/or wellbeing could be adversely

affected, if reliant on self-care. Consideration should also be given to safeguarding issues.

- **Note** that being exempt from paying a prescription charge does not automatically warrant an exception to the guidance.

What will the NHS do with the money its saves from this proposal?

Any money we save from this proposal will be reinvested back into other healthcare services and treatments.

Will this proposal affect people who don't have to pay for their prescriptions or those with a low income?

Yes, being exempt from paying a prescription charge does not automatically warrant an exception to the guidance and patients are encouraged to self care for simple minor ailments.

Does this include children? Yes, being exempt from paying a prescription charge does not automatically warrant an exception to the guidance. Parents are encouraged to self care for simple minor ailments like teething, nappy rash, mild hayfever.

Does this include the elderly? Yes, being exempt from paying a prescription charge does not automatically warrant an exception to the guidance. Patients are encouraged to self care for simple minor ailments. However if receiving care for a long term condition they may receive a prescription under the clinical exceptions outlined above.

Does this include me if I live in a care home? Yes, patients requiring medicines for short term self limiting conditions may find that the medicines will not be prescribed but will have to be purchased. Full information for care homes on how to manage Homely Remedies and Over the Counter Medicines can be found here:

[Homely Remedies and Medicines available over the Counter - Herefordshire CCG](#)

Does this include me if I have my medicines put into blister packs? Yes, patients who have their medicines repackaged into blister packs to help them manage their medicines day to day may no longer have OTC medicines included in the blister pack. This will depend upon the nature of the condition, its management and your health care professionals can advise you.

Does this include me if I have a carer / domiciliary care agency help me with my medicines? Yes, carers of patients who receive support services in their own home which involve taking medicines may be required to support patients with OTC medicines in original boxes. Full information for health and social care providers on how to manage Homely Remedies and Medicines available over the Counter is available here:

[Homely Remedies and Medicines available over the Counter - Herefordshire CCG](#)

If my care is under a specialist will this affect me? This depends on condition(s) being treated and for example some exclusions outlined specifically below:

- Treatment for complex patients (e.g. immunosuppressed patients)
- Patients on prescription only treatments

- Patients prescribed OTC products to treat an adverse effect or symptom of a more complex illness and/or prescription only medications should continue to have these products prescribed on the NHS, for example severe hay fever.

Is this proposal safe and fair?

Yes, because anyone who has a genuine ongoing clinical need for an OTC medicine will be prescribed it if it is appropriate. Some patients with long term conditions (like chronic pain) actually benefit from taking certain OTC medicines regularly, so these people will continue to receive prescriptions for these medicines.

Promoting self-care will help people to look after their health and wellbeing, so we are keen to make sure that people know how to access advice about their minor ailments from a community pharmacy. Doing this means that they may be able to start treating their condition sooner because they won't have to wait for a GP appointment.

This proposal will free up NHS funds that can then be used for other vital treatments and services.

What can I do to help my local NHS?

You can help us by keeping yourself as well as you can. Making lifestyle changes such as stopping smoking, reducing your alcohol intake, eating healthily and doing exercise can really reduce your chances of developing serious medical conditions later.

We recommend that you keep a supply of OTC medicines in your medicine cabinet at home so that you can start treating any minor ailments as soon as you become unwell.

<https://www.herefordshireccg.nhs.uk/your-services/community-pharmacies/stocking-a-safe-medicines-cabinet>

If you feel unwell and need advice you can speak to your pharmacist first to check if you really need an appointment with your GP.

Pharmacists have studied at university for five years to become medicines experts and they will be able to advise you on which medication is best for you. Here is a local resource for when your community pharmacy team can help you with a list of services and conditions from A-Z:

<https://www.herefordshireccg.nhs.uk/your-services/community-pharmacies>

If you would like to read about the different minor ailments and how to treat them, there is a lot of information on the NHS Choices website: <https://www.nhs.uk/>

References

Conditions for which over the counter items should not routinely be prescribed in primary care: Guidance for CCGs GATEWAY APPROVAL NUMBER: 07851

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/otc-guidance-for-ccgs.pdf>

Helping people look after themselves. A guide on self-care. Local Government Association
<https://www.local.gov.uk/helping-people-look-after-themselves-guide-self-care>